

Eritrea

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Eritrea remained one of the most repressive countries in the world in 2014 following a failed attempt by disgruntled soldiers the previous year to topple the regime of President Isaias Afwerki. In June, four Eritrean Catholic bishops risked the government's wrath by issuing a 38-page letter denouncing conditions in the country, which they described as "desolate." The letter called for the rule of law to be respected and the country's prisoners to be treated humanely. Later that month, the UN Human Rights Council launched a year-long investigation into allegations of human rights violations identified by UN Special Rapporteur Sheila Keetharuth, including Eritrea's system of indefinite national military service and its harsh penalties for citizens attempting to avoid that service.

Waves of people risked their lives to escape Eritrea in 2014, often in unsafe, overcrowded boats to Europe operated by human traffickers.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 1 / 40 [Key]**A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12**

Following Eritrea's formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993, a Transitional National Assembly chose Afwerki to serve as president until elections could be held. He has remained in charge ever since. His rule has become harshly authoritarian, particularly since the end of a bloody border war with Ethiopia in 2000.

A new constitution, ratified in 1997, called for "conditional" political pluralism and an elected 150-seat National Assembly, which would choose the president from among its members by a majority vote. This system has never been implemented, and national elections planned for 2001 have been postponed indefinitely. In December 2014, President Afwerki announced the drafting of a new constitution that would reduce economic inequality, stating that the document would serve Eritreans rather than "external desires." He gave few other details.

The Transitional National Assembly is comprised of 75 members of the ruling party—the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)—and 75 elected members. In 2004, regional assembly elections were conducted, but they were carefully orchestrated by the PFDJ and offered no real choice to voters.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

Created in 1994, the PFDJ is the only legal political party. The PFDJ and the military are in practice the only institutions of political significance in Eritrea, and both entities are strictly subordinate to the president.

C. Functioning of Government: 1 / 12

Corruption is a major problem. The government's control over foreign exchange effectively gives it sole authority over imports, and those in favor with the regime are allowed to profit from the smuggling and sale of scarce goods such as food, building materials, and alcohol. According to the International Crisis Group, senior military officials have profited from smuggling Eritreans out of the country, allegedly colluding with Sudanese paramilitary groups to capture escaped Eritreans and hold them hostage until their families pay ransom.

The government operates without public scrutiny, and few outside a small clique around the president have any insight into how policy and budget decisions are made or implemented.

Civil Liberties: 2 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 0 / 16

The law does not allow independent media to operate, and the government controls all broadcasting outlets. However, in 2013, a dissident group began circulating an underground newspaper, *Echoes of Forto*, in Asmara, written by a team based inside and outside the country. Circulation continued in 2014. The government controls the internet infrastructure and is thought to monitor online communications. Foreign media are available to those few who can afford a satellite dish. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 23 journalists were in prison in Eritrea in 2014.

The government places strict limits on the exercise of religion. Since 2002 it has officially recognized only four faiths: Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Lutheranism as practiced by the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Members of evangelical and Pentecostal churches face persecution. Jehovah's Witnesses are barred from government jobs and refused business permits and identity cards. According to Amnesty International, members of other churches have been jailed and tortured or otherwise ill-treated to make them abandon their faiths. As many as 3,000 people from unregistered religious groups are currently in prison because of their beliefs. Abune Antonios, patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest since speaking out against state interference in religion in 2006. Practicing religion during national military service is banned, including for religious leaders.

Academic freedom is constrained. Students in their last year of secondary school are subject to obligatory military service at Sawa Military Training Center, where conditions are harsh. Academics practice self-censorship and the government interferes with their course content and limits their ability to conduct research abroad. Eritrea's university system is effectively closed, replaced by regional colleges whose main purposes are military training and political indoctrination.

Freedom of expression in private discussions is limited. People are guarded in voicing their opinions for fear of being overheard by government informants.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are not recognized. The government maintains a hostile attitude toward civil society, and independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are not tolerated. A 2005 law requires NGOs to pay taxes on imported materials, submit project reports every three months, renew their licenses annually, and meet government-established target levels of financial resources. No international NGOs have worked in Eritrea since the last were forced to leave in 2011. The government placed strict controls on UN operations in the country, preventing staff from leaving the capital.

The government controls all union activity. The National Confederation of Eritrean Workers is the country's main union body and has affiliated unions for women, teachers, young people, and general workers.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

The judiciary, which was formed by decree in 1993, is understaffed, unprofessional, and does not issue rulings at odds with government positions. Most criminal cases are heard by the Special Court, composed of PFDJ loyalists chosen by the president. The International Crisis Group has described Eritrea as a "prison state" for its flagrant disregard of the rule of law and its willingness to detain anyone suspected of opposing the regime, usually without charge, for indefinite periods. In 2013, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that there were between 5,000 and 10,000 political prisoners in Eritrea. They include surviving members of a group from the ruling party who publicly criticized Afwerki in 2001. Approximately 50 people were arrested following the January 2013 coup attempt, and no information has been released about them.

Torture, arbitrary detentions, and political arrests are common. Prison conditions are harsh, and outside monitors such as the International Committee of the Red Cross are denied access to detainees. Juvenile prisoners are often incarcerated alongside adults. In some facilities, inmates are held in metal shipping containers or underground cells in extreme temperatures. Prisoners are often denied medical treatment and many suffer poor physical health due to the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in which they are held. The government maintains a network of secret detention facilities.

The Kunama people, one of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups, face severe discrimination. Same-sex sexual relations are criminalized and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals face legal and social discrimination.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 2 / 16

Freedom of movement, both inside and outside the country, is tightly controlled. Eritreans under the age of 50 are rarely given permission to go abroad, and those who try to travel without the correct documents face imprisonment. The authorities adopt a shoot-on-sight policy toward people found in locations deemed off-limits, such as mining facilities and areas close to the border. Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers who are repatriated from other countries are detained. Despite these risks, approximately 2,000 people flee the country every month, making Eritrea the tenth largest source of refugees in the world. When the government's information minister failed to return to Eritrea following an overseas trip in 2013, his elderly father, daughter, and brother were detained; they are believed to still be in custody.

Government policy is formally supportive of free enterprise, and citizens are in theory able to choose their employment, establish private businesses, and operate them without harassment. In reality, a conscription system ties most able-bodied men and women—even those under age 18—to obligatory military service and can also entail compulsory labor for enterprises controlled by the political elite. The official 18-month service period is open-ended in practice, and conscientious-objector status is not recognized. The police frequently conduct round-ups of people thought to be evading national service; those who resist can be executed on the spot. The government imposes collective punishment on the families of deserters, forcing them to pay heavy fines (approximately \$3,350) and putting them in prison if they cannot pay. The enforced contraction of the labor pool, combined with a lack of investment and rigid state control of private enterprise, has crippled the national economy. The government levies a compulsory 2-percent tax on income earned by citizens living overseas, and those who do not pay place their relatives in Eritrea at risk of arrest.

Women hold some senior government positions, including four ministerial posts. The government has made attempts to promote women's rights, with laws mandating equal educational opportunity, equal pay for equal work, and penalties for domestic violence. However, traditional societal discrimination against women persists in the countryside. The government banned female genital mutilation in 2007, though the practice remains widespread in rural areas. Sexual abuse of women during military service is a serious problem.

The U.S. State Department's 2014 *Trafficking in Persons Report* ranks Eritrea at Tier 3, describing it as a source country for individuals subjected to forced labor and sexual exploitation.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology